



More Stay Interviews, Fewer Exit Interviews

The stay interview is a productive tool needed in managers' tool kits — though managers must heed important distinctions to be successful.

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Most talent managers have likely asked these questions of an employee: “Why are you leaving? And what can I, as a manager, do to keep you here?”

Those two questions are typically at the heart of the exit interview — the mechanism talent managers use during an employee's final moments to glean a deeper understanding of the reasons he or she is leaving, sometimes in an attempt to pinpoint a larger issue and alleviate the threat of further attrition.

But all too often this approach is insufficient; by the time exit interviews take place, employees have made up their minds, and seldom do they reverse their decisions. It's simply too late.

Luckily, the alternative doesn't require a major shift in thinking. Instead, it takes a switch in when during the employee life cycle a similar, but arguably more effective, conversation takes place.

Managers would be wise to learn the art of the stay interview. Put simply, more stay interviews equals fewer exit interviews. What's more, having “What will keep you here?” conversations is more apt to promote the engagement culture that organizations must have to survive and thrive amid increasing competition for talent.

Many people leave companies because no one asked them what might keep them there or what would entice them away. Instead of asking, many managers opt to guess what is best to retain their talent — and they're often wrong.

In an exit interview-oriented environment, asking employees what would keep them is folly; they already have one foot out the door.

Why, then, are talent managers prone to ask perfectly effective questions at the wrong time? It's time to change that thinking, with stay interviews as the remedy.

A single stay interview with a treasured employee is not enough. The most successful managers ask early and often. They listen carefully to the answers and then partner with employees to help them get what they want and need to remain productive, engaged and happy as members of the organization.

To be sure, managers need help. Despite the perceived simplicity of the stay interview, managers might be reluctant to broach the subject for a variety of reasons. To some managers, conducting a stay interview might back them into a conversation they simply don't want to have or fear they have little power to address. What if the employee says he or she needs more money or a promotion to stay?

These are valid concerns. The fear of being unable to deliver on an employee's stay request can get in the way of managers having such important conversations.

Performance Art

So where should talent managers start?

First, conducting a stay interview requires recognizing the process' many nuances. The most imperative comes in the kinds of questions asked.

Consider two examples:

“What about your job makes you jump out of bed in the morning?” This question conjures up an image immediately and gets the employee thinking about why he or she is excited about going to work. It’s an unexpected question about job satisfaction, and it typically elicits some fascinating responses: “The project I’m working on” or “I love my colleagues” or “the idea of my Friday massage gets me going.” The manager will learn more about this employee just by asking this question.

“What makes you hit the snooze button?” This is a safe way to ask employees what they do not like as much about the job. Employees can answer this question in many ways: “I’m just not an early morning person,” might be one way. In this case, perhaps the manager could flex a bit regarding start time. Or maybe allow them to catch up on emails from home, allowing them to hit the freeway after rush hour.

Another talented employee said he dreaded Monday morning staff meetings and therefore delayed his trek to work for as long as possible. Could that staff meeting be shorter or moved to another time?

Aside from “What will keep you?” here are some proven stay interview questions managers can ask:

- If you were to win the lottery and resign, what would you miss the most about your job?
- If you had a magic wand, what would be the one thing you would change about this department, team or organization?
- As your manager, what could I do a little more of or a little less of?
- What can we do to support your career goals?
- What do you want to learn this year?
- What makes for a great day?
- Do you get enough recognition? How do you like to be recognized?

Ultimately, managers need to find the stay interview questions that work for them and their employees.

The content of the stay interview, however, is only half the battle. How questions are posed and the way in which managers listen is just as imperative as what questions are asked.

Managers might start by saying, “You are so critical to me and to this team. I can’t imagine losing you. I might not tell you that enough. But I’d like to know what will keep you here and what might entice you away now or in the future. What kind of things are you looking for from the job or from me as a manager?”

Then they need to listen actively to the responses. “Does he want a chance to learn something new? Does she want exposure to the senior team?”

Beyond simply listening, how managers respond — verbally and nonverbally — and what they say or don’t say is also critical. Responses like “that’s unrealistic” or “tell me why you are worth that” or “you’ve kind of peaked out” will halt the dialogue and cause employees to clam up.

Instead, managers should aim to tell the truth about the barriers to saying “yes” while demonstrating that they care enough to get creative and make an effort to help employees get what they really want.

What managers ask and how they respond during a stay interview will determine the outcome of this important interaction. A hypothetical situation exemplifies this. Charlie set up a meeting with his plant manager, Ken, for Monday morning. After some brief conversation about the weekend, Charlie said, “Ken — you are critical to me and to this organization. I’m not sure I’ve told you that directly or often enough, but you are. I can’t imagine losing you. So, I’d like to know what will keep you here, and what might entice you away?”

Ken was a bit taken aback, but felt flattered. He thought for a moment and then said, “You know, I aspire to move up in the organization at some point, and I’d love to have some exposure to the senior team. I’d like to see how they operate, and I’d like them to get to know me, too.” Charlie responded, “I could take you with me to some senior staff meetings. Would that be a start?” Ken said, “That would be great.”

Charlie delivered on Ken’s request one week later. But it’s not always so simple.

What if managers can't give what their people want? Many managers don't ask because they fear one of two common responses: a request for a raise or a promotion. They might not be able to deliver on those kinds of requests — at least not in the near future.

So what should they do? Use these four steps as a starting point:

1. Tell employees how much they're valued. "You're worth that and more to me."
2. Tell the truth about the obstacles you face in granting their requests. "I'd love to say yes, but I will need to investigate the possibility. I'm honestly not sure what I can do immediately, given some recent budget cuts."
3. Care enough to look into their requests. "I hear your request. Let me look into it and let's meet again next Friday to talk about possibilities."
4. Ask, What else? "Meanwhile, Ken, what else matters to you? What else are you hoping for?"

If you ask "what else?" four times, you're likely to get two to three requests that you can deliver on. Though salary is important, people want more from work than just a paycheck. In fact, according to our ongoing survey data, of the top five "stay factors," four are within managers' control.

The top "stay factors" are: exciting, challenging or meaningful work; being recognized, valued and respected; supportive management/good boss; career growth, learning and development; job location; job security and stability; fair pay; flexible work environment; pride in the organization, its mission or product; fun, enjoyable work environment; working with great co-workers or clients; good benefits; and loyalty and commitment to co-workers or boss.

Culture Counts

Lastly, how do cultural differences play out in this foundational engagement strategy? For example, in some cultures, such as in Japan or Korea, asking questions is not traditionally encouraged in a business environment. If the boss were to say, "What do you think?" the subordinate might simply say, "Yes."

Managers who lead in a culture with different norms about communication may need to find a work-around. Some managers have used anonymous surveys or tasked someone else with the asking. For example, one global company that declined to be named for this story hired a team of external consultants to conduct stay interviews with key employees in the organization. All those interviewed had an opportunity to read the transcript of their interviews and make additions or deletions.

They then approved the final, confidential document that was given to their managers.

One manager said he would rather have had one-on-one conversations, but he knew it would have made some of his employees very uncomfortable. This work-around helped him get what he needed in a safe and effective way for his multicultural work team.

Even with such obstacles, finding ways to learn what employees need during their employee experience — and not at its end — is vital. Prudent leaders should stop guessing what will keep their top performers happy. Proper stay interviews are an effective tool. Set aside time to start a dialogue; don't assume you know what employees want.

To simply ask may be the most important engagement and retention strategy of all. Not only will asking lead to talented people feeling valued, but their answers will provide the information managers need to customize the strategies needed to keep them.

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Bio

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